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WHY I BELIEVE

A SERIES OF AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL CONFESSIONS

III. WHY I BELIEVE IN GOD

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Before I can answer the question, why I believe in God, there is a prior question which must be asked and answered, and that is, what kind of God I believe God to be. For there are many different ways of thinking of God and men are led to them for very different reasons. All religions, indeed, are at one in declaring that whatever else God may be he is the supreme object of worship. But experience shows that men have worshiped many different kinds of God and that their ideas differ partly because of differences in their conception of what is supreme and partly because of differences in their view of the nature of worship.

The God whom I worship is the Christian God, a self-conscious personality, who has a plan for the world and who invites men to co-operate with him in realizing it. He is known to me in a thousand ways, for he touches my life at every point where I touch reality. But he is known to me most clearly in the character of Jesus Christ, who expresses in human form the qualities of righteousness, love, and wisdom which I believe to be present in God supremely.

When I say that God is a self-conscious personality I do not mean that he is simply a larger man. Consciousness as I know it in myself is limited in

countless ways. It is limited by space and time, by the conditions of the physical environment, outward and inward, including in this the nervous system and the brain. It is limited by heredity, individual and social, and all the other complex conditions which make each human individual the imperfect, struggling, growing, aspiring creature that he is. In contrast to this, God, as the supreme object of my worship, represents to me the realized ideal, the things I would like to be but am not. He is not only *my* realized ideal, but that of my fellows as well, the bond of union which unites me with those from whom I differ, because he possesses qualities which we all alike reverence and after which we all alike aspire.

How God can be this I cannot understand, as the less can never understand the greater. But even where I cannot understand, I believe, because there is something in me which tells me that I myself am greater than I know and that in admiration of the greatest I find my truest self fulfilled. Personality is the name which I give to that in me which thus aspires after the best, and in saying that God is person I am using the word that describes the best within me as the fittest word I can command to suggest the best without me.

I have called this God the Christian God. I am well aware that God has often been otherwise described in Christian history. He has been defined in creed and confession as omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent, immutable, eternal, as Father, Son, and Spirit, three persons in one substance and more of the same kind. I respect the motives which inspired these statements. I see in the men who made them the desire to express in the language of their day the same aspiration after the highest which I discover in myself, but to me they add little or nothing to what I have already said. They are attempts to say in the technical language of the schools what the simple faith of multitudes has proved in experience, that in the God whom Jesus Christ has revealed as Father we have the answer to our questions, the satisfaction of our aspirations, the solace of our sorrows, and the inspiration of our highest endeavor. Like enough to us to assure us of his understanding, he is yet far enough above us to command our reverence, and in the union of kinship and transcendence the mystery of his being consists.

There are many questions which such a description leaves unanswered. It tells me nothing of the relation of God to the physical universe we call nature. It tells me little of the relation of God to the social process which we know as history. It leaves unsolved the world-old debate as to the relation of freedom of law and the still older, more baffling puzzle as to the origin and meaning of evil. With all of these my God is concerned; in all I find him present. He reveals himself in history; he reveals

himself in nature; he provides the moral environment which helps me in my struggle after the good. Above all he is with me in the experience of evil, warning me of its danger, sympathizing with me in its suffering, redeeming me from its deadening and soul-destroying effect and revealing to me in and through the whole mysterious and heart-breaking experience a moral meaning which is big with creative and ennobling possibility. But he acts in all this not as an arbitrary despot or even as an indulgent parent, but as a wise, sympathetic, patient, tender friend, using laws whose sovereignty he himself respects for ends which transcend law as personality always transcends the instruments which it uses.

So much for what I believe about God. Now as to why I believe in him. Here again I must distinguish, for there is more than one kind of belief. I may believe with the mind on the constraint of logic, or with the will on the testimony of authority, or I may believe with my whole personality, mind, will, and affections alike, because I find in the object believed in the answer to deep-seated longings rooted in my nature which make me what I am. To answer the question why I believe in God I must tell the story of the way in which in my own case belief in the first and second of these senses was replaced by belief in the third.

I began by believing in God because my father and mother before me believed in him. I was born in a home in which belief in such a God was taken for granted. It was the implicit assumption of all that was said and done. His presence was recognized in the grace said at meals, in the family prayers which

began the day, in the church service to which we all went on Sunday, in personal conversation with father or mother when things went wrong or new opportunities were to be faced. But most of all it was recognized in the lives of my father and mother. No one could be with them for any length of time without discovering that the existence of God, and such a God, was as real a fact to them as any other fact of life. No one could observe them without perceiving that this belief had definite effects upon their characters which could not be overlooked. In the home in which I was brought up prayer was literally communion with God and it made a difference in life.

At first, then, my belief in God, like all my other beliefs, came to me from without on the basis of external authority. I believed because I found others believing. But even at this early stage there is a transition to be noted. What I first believed because my father told me, I soon came to believe because of what I saw my father's belief did for him. I believed in my father's God because I believed in my father and what I saw in him justified my trust.

As I grew older and began to think for myself, this simple belief was subjected to a double test. It was no longer possible for me to take over my father's faith without question. I had to put it to the test of my own experience, and here I found that revision was necessary, both as to what I believed and as to the reason for my believing it.

It was necessary for me in the first place to revise my idea of what God was like, for I learned that even as to the

simplest realities men do not agree. In college and still more in the theological seminary I discovered, to my surprise, how wide a difference of interpretation can find lodgment within the compass of a single word. I faced modern science with its doctrine of development; biblical criticism with its emphasis upon the human element in the Bible; contemporary philosophy with its challenge of historic dogma and its affirmation of the relativity of our knowledge. I had to distinguish in my beliefs between that which is less and that which is more certain, and, what is more important still, between that which matters little and that which matters much.

Into such a crucible with all my other inherited beliefs my belief in God was thrown, and when it emerged it was the same and not the same. It was the same in its central content, but different in its emphasis and in its implications. I still believed in God as person, wise, loving, Christlike, fatherly Helper, and Friend, but I realized, as I could not realize before, how little we know of personality and its laws, how strange and surprising a thing it is to be good and wise and loving, out of how great a background of mystery, surrounded by what unanswered and unanswerable questions has come to us the human figure through whose character as through a window Christians look into the face of God.

There was a time when I supposed God could be demonstrated by reason. I found this was not true. The arguments used to establish his existence, like all arguments as to ultimates,

assumed what they professed to prove and were rather evidences of an existing faith than its ground. There was a time when I believed that revelation could supplement the limitations of reason, not realizing that revelation, if it is really to reveal, must address itself to reason, and that to substitute one mystery for another is not to bring light but only to exchange darkness for darkness. So I was led to see that with faith in God as with all our ultimate beliefs there is only one road to enlightenment, namely, to accept as real that to which that which is best in us irresistibly points. It is so with all the realities that matter most: our friendships, our ideals, that better unrealized self we know we ought to be. We believe in them because of an inner necessity of our moral nature which discovers itself to us in the course of our practical task of living. We do not *argue* ourselves into believing in them. We find them; or rather, they find us. So it is with God. I saw that if I was to continue to believe in God with a good conscience, it must be because there was something in me which I could not surrender without ceasing to be myself, which required the reality of God as the complement of my own reality.

So I was led to the second revision of which I have spoken, the revision of the grounds for my belief in God. I had begun by believing in God because my father told me there was a God. I was confirmed in this belief because of what I saw of its effects in my father's character. I now perceived that if I was to continue to believe with full conviction it must be because I could find

effects in myself which corresponded to those which I had observed in him.

But I soon found that there is no way in which one generation can reproduce the experience of another even in a matter so sacred and fundamental as belief in God. There were things which God meant to my father which he could not mean to me. There were ways in which he was conscious of touching him in experience which I sought in vain. To him prayer had an intimacy, a directness, a simplicity, which in the rush and hurry and complexity of my life it became increasingly difficult if not impossible for me to attain. God was real indeed, and near, but no longer clear-cut and distinct as of old. Everywhere present—in nature, in history, in my own life—he was for that very reason nowhere clearly defined, and there were moods in which it seemed as if one could dispense with him altogether.

But these moods were passing. As I went farther on into the strange new world which modern science opened before me I found there the same needs of guidance, of inspiration, of security, of comradeship, of worship, of which our fathers had been conscious before us, and which has led them to their faith in God. There was the same inner demand for assurance that the aspiration after the ideal, which now as in the past gave life its true meaning, was answered by some reality in which it found its fulfilment. There was the same necessity of choice between two rival alternatives, either to trust one's best as the revelation of the true, or to surrender the hope of moral unity at the behest of one's fears. There

was the same conviction, all the more compelling because of the long and painful road by which it had been attained, that in Jesus and that for which he stood there was the best that man had yet known or could yet conceive.

Facing these alternatives, how was one to know which way the truth lay. There was but one way that I could see and that was by trying. One must put one's faith to the proof. One must live as though God were what faith declares him to be and see whether he did not answer the test.

But one must experiment in one's own way. What does it mean for the modern Christian to find in experience the God whom Christ has revealed? It means to discover, amid all the selfishness and disillusionment of our time, men who make their own the ideal of unselfish sharing which Jesus made central in his picture of God. It means to see a new religion of mutual helpfulness and service taking the place of the old self-centered religion which was content with winning heaven for one's self, however many of one's brothers might fail. It means to feel new bonds of sympathy uniting one with men of every name and race and intellectual and social creed who yet believe that love is the greatest thing in the world. It means to look back over the history of Christianity with a new perspective, counting great things great, and small, according as they relate themselves to the central fact that God is love.

It is clear then that if this be the way to find God in experience I cannot

find him alone. For my God is my neighbor's God as well, and I can be sure of him only so long as I can see my neighbor finding him too. If the philosophy that inspired the late war be true, if that philosophy be true which in the name of patriotism and religion many would have us adopt today as the foundation of our new peace—the philosophy which says that a man or a nation may go its own way alone, careless of what happens to its neighbor so that its own house be safe, then more is gone than a peaceful world or a League of Nations. God is gone, the God in whom alone I find the answer to my deepest needs, the inspiration to my highest endeavor, the assurance of my largest hopes. My faith in God and my faith in the man he has made and the society he is making stand or fall together.

Will they fall? I, for one, refuse to believe it. Come what may I cast in my lot with my father's faith, become mine because put to the test of my own experience. For this faith and what it means for the world I will join hands with every man of good will, no matter how widely in other respects his creed may differ from my own, who believes that good is stronger than evil, love than hate, generosity than greed, hope than despair, in building a world that shall be a fit home for children of such a Father. And I dare to believe that acting thus, I am acting with as good a scientific conscience as any who in the name of science or philosophy, so called, would constrain me to its alternative.